

Understand by DBSean

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Summary:

"I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Mike Wheeler and Chief Hopper have a long-overdue discussion about their favorite person.

Understand

Author's Note:

A/N: Third “Stranger Things” fanfic in a week. Either I’m on a roll, or the holidays are getting to me. I’ve read a lot of interactions between Mike and Hopper over the last couple of weeks, mostly in regards to their relationships with Eleven, and thought I would take a whack at it myself.

Post-Season 2, so quite a few spoilers.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

The sound of Michael Wheeler’s voice, unbidden and unexpected, momentarily threw off Jim Hopper’s concentration on the road ahead. It was April, 1985, and the police chief was driving the thirteen-year-old boy to the cabin for his semimonthly visit with Eleven, under the usual pretense that Mike was tutoring Hopper’s long-lost and recently rediscovered daughter, Jane.

Though she would presumably be attending Hawkins High School with the rest of the party come autumn, Eleven’s existence (and her largely fabricated past) was to remain a secret until then, one known only to a few choice families. Before ‘Jane’ could actually enter high school, however, she had quite a bit of schooling to catch up on, and thus an arrangement was worked out: in return for actually taking the time to tutor her in some of the basic aspects of English, math, science, and social studies, Mike was allowed to visit Eleven twice a month. It wasn’t a perfect arrangement, but it was the best they could come up, and it had been working thus far.

So, to hear Mike speak on their early Saturday morning drive from the police station to the cabin in the woods was not in itself unusual; they spoke fairly often during those drives, usually about Eleven’s studies or the state of the rest of the party. Nor was it odd for Mike to be the first to speak, though Hopper usually fulfilled that role as the authority figure.

No, what made this unusual was that Mike was actually talking to Hopper about himself, and that was something he never did. The boy wore his heart on his sleeve (one only had to witness how he always looked at Eleven like he was seeing her for the very first time, as though his heart would beat right of his chest), but openly admitting and expressing his emotions (especially to Hopper, the police chief, the adopted father of the girl he was clearly madly in love with, of all people) was something altogether unexpected, and to say Hopper was surprised would be an understatement.

“You fall asleep or something, kid?” Hopper asked him as he finally came back to his senses, carefully steering past a large tree branch that had fallen onto the road, evidently debris from the storm they had suffered the night before. “You didn’t yell at me. Hell, you haven’t said a word since I picked you up.”

“No, I mean...back in November,” Mike reminded him, his head bowed slightly, unable to look the officer in the eyes. “At Will’s house. When...when El came back. When I found out you had been hiding her.”

Hopper nodded. He remembered. He remembered Mike Wheeler shouting at him, lashing out at him, and then finally sobbing into his shirt as an entire year’s worth of pain and loss and anger and rage came out all at once. Yes, he remembered.

“I know you were only trying to protect her,” Mike went on, still staring at his feet and unable to look Hopper in the eye. “And...and me, and everyone else. I get that. But...I didn’t understand. Not then. All I felt was...anger. I’d never been so angry in my entire life.”

Mike sniffed lightly, and Hopper looked over to see tears gleaming along the edges of the young man’s eyes. He hadn’t been expecting this.

“It wasn’t fair, not to you, or to her,” Mike continued, “but I couldn’t help it. And I’m sorry.”

Hopper sighed as Mike looked away and used the sleeve of his sweater to wipe away the tears stinging his eyes. “It’s in the past, kid. You don’t have to apologize.”

"I do," Mike insisted.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because, even after everything I said...you still let me see her," Mike admitted, his voice growing softer still. "It...it means a lot to me."

Hopper nodded. "I know it's been hard, kid."

"You have no idea," Mike muttered just loud enough for Hopper to hear, but low enough that he knew he wasn't supposed to hear.

Hopper frowned, shifting his eyes back and forth between the road ahead and the surly young man sitting on the seat next to him and looking out the window. He knew he was supposed to say something, but hell if he knew what to say. Despite all appearances, he knew Mike Wheeler wasn't just another thirteen-year-old boy; the kid had gone through more trauma than most people experience in a lifetime, and he hadn't even entered high school yet. What do you say to someone like that?

The truth, he realized. You tell them the truth.

"You really want to know why I let you see her?" Hopper finally asked, looking over at Mike without turning his head. "Even though you blew up at me, even though she's supposed to be hidden, even though I'm pretty damn sure I caught you two making out last time, you want to know why I make this damn drive every other week?"

Mike nodded, trying to ignore the redness in his cheeks that suddenly appeared when Hopper mentioned that last part.

"353 days," Hopper told him. "That's what you said, right? You called her every night for 353 days. You didn't know if she was alive or dead, but you called anyway, and I'll bet you didn't skip a single night, did you?"

Mike shook his head. "Not one."

"Didn't think so," Hopper said, his face as stern as ever. "Look, I'm not gonna sit here and pretend I understand everything you were going through, kid, but...I know you care about her. And I know you

had to be in a lot of pain. That year without her, when you didn't know...it had to be just about the worst year of your life."

Mike nodded, looking down, and spoke softly. "It felt like I was dying."

"I'll bet it did," Hopper agreed. "But you know what? She lived for those calls, kid. Every night. They kept her going. And you know what keeps her going now? Seeing you."

A spell of uncomfortable silence took hold for several moments, the air heavy with unspoken words and unaddressed emotions, before either of them spoke again.

"Thank you," Mike said softly.

"You don't gotta thank me, kid," Hopper reminded him, glaring slightly as an oncoming car noticeably began to slow down upon realizing the word 'POLICE' emblazoned in large letters on the side of Hopper's truck. "Like I said, this isn't for you. It's for her. You make her happy in a way I can't. She thinks you're the most perfect goddamn thing since Eggos were invented."

Hopper paused for a minute before adding, "And I guess I'm kinda fond of you, too."

This one caught Mike by surprise. "R-Really?"

"Yeah, don't get all mushy about it," the police chief said as he turned the car off the paved streets of Hawkins and began heading along the dirt road leading deeper into the woods. "You're a good kid, Wheeler. You're brave as hell, you're smarter than I ever was or will be, and I know you'd sooner die than hurt my girl. That makes you okay in my book."

Hopper didn't need to look over to know Mike's face must have been as red as a tomato, and he chuckled softly to himself as he navigated his way through the woods amid the rising sun. Maybe he was starting to learn how to be a real parent, after all.

There was another moment of silence, though one much less uncomfortable, before Mike spoke again. "You said, she, um...she

thinks I'm perfect?"

"Kid, I don't know what you two went through together, but El thinks the sun shines out of your ass. She thinks you're Superman, or something." Hopper frowned lightly and turned to look at Mike. "Superman's still cool, right?"

Mike chuckled. "Yeah. Yeah, he's still cool."

'Thank god,' thought Hopper, 'at least some things don't change.'

"It just doesn't make any sense," Mike continued, gazing off into the woods beyond the car, as if seeking the cabin in the distance. "You know, for someone as awesome and amazing and powerful as she is to like someone like...me. To think all those things about me. She's so special, and I'm so...not. It's...it's..."

"Overwhelming?" Hopper offered.

"Yeah."

"Honestly, kid, I feel the same way sometimes," Hopper admitted. "I know I don't deserve her. How could I, right? But it doesn't matter. I just have to do the best I can and hope that, one day, I can be as good of a person as she already thinks I am. I have to give it my best shot. You understand?"

"Yeah," Mike said with a small nod. "Yeah, I understand."

"Good."

With that, Hopper finally brought the car to a slow stop and put it into park. Without a word, the two of them exited the vehicle and became the short hike to the cabin. Nothing was said between them, but Hopper could tell from the frown on Mike's face that he was still wrestling with all of the new feelings inside of him, trying to determine how he could ever attain the level of perfection Eleven had inadvertently designated upon him.

'He's a tough kid, I'll give him that,' thought Hopper. 'This has to be killing him. I just hope he has what it takes to make it a few more months.'

Then they were over the crest of the hill and the cabin was in sight and both of them looked up to find the curly-haired girl sitting on the deck and waiting for them. Upon seeing them both, Eleven's eyes seemed to light up like fireworks, and she leapt onto her feet, beaming as she watched them approach with all the impatience expected of one so young.

Hopper smiled and then turned to look at Mike, not the least bit surprised to see the goofy smile quickly spreading across the young man's face. All of the worry and doubt and frustration Mike had been feeling seemed to disappear in an instant, and now he looked upon Eleven as though he were watching the sunrise for the first time in his entire life, as though he was looking upon a sight of unparalleled beauty, one meant for him and him alone.

'You know, on second thought,' Hopper thought to himself, 'I think the kid's gonna do just fine.'

"So what do you say, Wheeler?" Hopper asked, reaching over and squeezing the shoulder of the lovestruck thirteen-year-old. "You ready to be the men she thinks we are?"

Mike nodded without ever looking away from Eleven. "For her."

"For her," Hopper agreed as he drew his hand back and began leading the way over the tripwire and towards the girl they both loved. "Let's go give it our best shot."

Author's Note:

A/N: This ended up being about twice as long as I had planned, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I love the idea of Mike and Hopper bonding over the one thing they have in common: how much they care for El.

Thanks for reading, and be sure to leave some comments or kudos before you leave!